DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 092 985 CS 201 432

AUTHOR Isto, Sarah A.
TITLE College English and Alaska Native Students: "First Aid" for Entering Freshmen.
PUB DATE Dec 73
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 19-20, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS American Indians; College Freshmen; Composition (Literary); *English (Second Language); Eskimos; *Nonstandard Dialects; Reading; *Remedial Courses; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Alaska; Aleuts

ABSTRACT

Three special English courses have been developed to help poorly prepared native University of Alaska freshmen whose three major groups--Aleuts, Eskimos, and Indians--embrace a variety of linguistic backgrounds: (1) a course for students more fluent in English which uses English as a Second Language techniques, (2) a writing course which prepares students for basic freshman English, and (3) a course designed to meet the students' immediate reading, writing, and note-taking needs. Each section of this latter course is paired with a specific freshman lecture course in which students are enrolled for credit while the instructor sits in. This enables the English instructor to coordinate his presentation of skill practice with assignments in the paired course, to use relevant examples from the lecture, and to evaluate his students' applications of new skills in another class. Although a few problems such as heavy teaching loads, less teaching efficiency, and credit determination have arisen, they are outweighed by student success in some courses which assures them of another university semester in which to learn more English. (JM)

ED 092985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

COLLEGE ENGLISH AND ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS: "FIRST AID" FOR ENTERING FRESHMEN

by

Sarah A. Isto

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sarah A. Isto

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Department of English
Student Orientation Services
University of Alaska
December 1973

CS 201 432

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

College English and Alaska Native Students: "First Aid" for Entering Freshmen

Professor Carey's request for papers "on teaching English to Eskimos," reminded me of the dilemma of the three English teachers who were hired by the University of Alaska four years ago to initiate a program to teach English to entering Native students. These teachers, trained in Teaching English as a Second Language and recently recruited from Hawaii and Kansas, quickly discovered that teaching English to Alaska Natives was much more than a matter of teaching English to Eskimos. Alaska Native is a term which embraces three major groups: Aleuts, Eskimos, and Indians. (Within this latter group there are four major subgroups: Athabascans, Tlingits, Haidas, and Tsimshians.)[1] Thus Native sutdents have a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds. About one-fourth of the Native freshmen entering the University of Alaska are bilingual, having learned English between the ages of six and twelve; about a third have only a rudimentary knowledge of a Native language; the remainder speak English as their first and only language but use a dialect that differs in several respects from standard English. The new English teachers who were to work primarily with Native students realized immediately that the courses they were designing could not rely on transfer from any particular language to English. They also discovered that little literature existed on teaching English to this varied group.[2]

However, these students did have some characteristics in common. Few were prepared to enter the University's basic freshman composition course (English 111), write college-level essay tests or term papers,

or read college-level texts. Most came from rural schools or boarding schools where college-bound students were the exception rather than the rule. A large number who entered college did not complete their studies. In 1963-64, for example, forty Native students, coming from a group which comprises about 20% of the state's population, entered the University to make up 16% of the freshman class. Four years later, five Natives received bachelor's degrees in a class of 150 baccalaureates. (Thus only three per cent of these graduates were Native.)

The hiring in 1970 of the three English teachers and several counselors to aid Native students represented in part the University's commitment to increasing this percentage by recruiting more Native students and reducing their drop-out rate.

This effort has met with some success. From 1963 to 1973 the number of entering Native students rose from 40 to approximately 100 on the Fairbanks campus.[3] (Natives now make up about one-third of the entering freshmen.) A side effect of this influx, however, has been that a larger proportion of Native students, as measured by ACT scores, are not well prepared for college. In 1968-69 seventy per cent of the Native freshmen had "low to medium" (0 to 20) ACT composite scores. In 1971-72 eighty per cent fell into this group.[4]

The special English classes are designed to meet the needs of these poorly prepared students; and, according to an evaluation by the University's educational research organization, we are having some success. The chances of success among Native students with low ACT scores (0 to 10) if they take our special courses are one in two; if they do not, one in twelve. Similarly, the chances of success among Native students with medium ACT scores (11 to 20) if they take our

courses are one in two; if they do not, one in four.[5] The special English classes are all electives enthusiastically recommended by academic advisors, and at present nearly all poorly prepared Native students elect to take them.

In attempting to develop courses that would teach Native students to adapt old skills and develop new skills to meet the demands of the university, we have tried several approaches--some of them successfully. The three of us responsible for teaching English primarily to Natives now have three special courses in which we have some confidence. One of these (English 103) is designed for students who are more fluent in a Native tongue than in English, and makes use of English as a Second Language techniques. Another, a writing course (English 106), prepares students for basic freshman composition by writing and producing a magazine of non-fiction articles about Native Alaska--a technique borrowed from Eliot Wiggington of Foxfire. These courses have prototypes with which many people are acquainted, so I would like to describe in detail the third course, which as far as I know is original with the special English teachers[6] at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Because it is designed to cope with the immediate needs of a group of students with a variety of linguistic backgrounds, many of its aspects may be applicable to weak students at other universities.

The catalog title of this course--English 104: Intensive Developmental English--is unusually undescriptive, even for a catalog title. Privately, we refer to English 104 as our "first aid" course because it is designed to meet the immediate reading, writing, and note-taking problems of the incoming student. It has become so popular, and we see it as so vital, that most of our fall semester teaching load is devoted to it.

The course's "first aid" is directed to survival in traditional

freshman lecture courses (e.g. introductory sociology, history, and biology). Judging from our observations and the reports of past students,[7] the problems of note-taking, reading, writing, and studying which are revealed by these classes are the most difficult academic problems facing the incoming rural student. To ensure that work done to develop these skills is immediately relevant, we "pair" each section of English 104 with a specific freshman lecture course. Thus, for example, all the students in English 104, Sections 1, 2, and 3, are also taking Anthropology 101, Section 2. Likewise, all the English 104 students in Sections 4, 5, and 6 are taking Biology 104, Section 1. At various times we have paired English 104 sections with introductory sociology, anthropology, economics, history, geography, and biology.

In order that the instructor and students work together on the problems encountered in these large impersonal courses, both the English 104 students and their instructor attend the "paired" course (e.g. Anthropology 101). The students are enrolled for credit, the English instructor sits in. The "paired" course also has a large number of non-English 104 students in it as these lectures usually enroll between seventy-five and one hundred students.

We regard the English instructor's attendence at the lecture course vital to the success of English 104 because it enables him to time appropriately his presentation of various kinds of skill practice with regard to assignments in the "paired" course, use relevant examples from the lecture, and evaluate his students' progress by the way they are able to apply their new skills to another class. Sitting in on another class three days a week is time consuming for the English instructor, who usually has three, five-hour English 104 sections to

teach; therefore we set our courses up so that no instructor has sections paired with more than one lecture course.

In general, English 104 is designed to teach students to:

- take organized, readable notes from a lecture.
- read a college-level textbook, identifying main ideas as he reads.
- locate and take notes from supplementary library materials recommended in the lecture.
- synthesize this information into a coherent body of material which can be remembered during examinations.
- take objective and essay examinations, with special emphasis on writing well-organized, readable essay answers.
- write a library research paper.

Because English 104 meets five days per week and the lecture course three days per week, there is adequate time to take advantage of unexpected or fortuitous events in the lecture classroom. Although there is a good deal of communication between the English instructor and the lecturer to facilitate planning in the English course, we attempt not to influence the "paired" course since students, for their own future survival, must learn to adapt to an unaltered and unadulterated lecture course.

Our criteria for choosing lecture courses to pair with are that they must have a sympathetic and cooperative lecturer and an adequate number of characteristics which constitute stumbling blocks for the rural Native students. These "stumbling blocks" are: 1) a large impersonal class, 2) textbook reading assigned in segments of ten or more pages, 3) some course material presented only in lecture, 4) examinations which are at least one-fourth essay questions, 5) supplementary reading assignments from library sources, and 6) an optional or required term paper.

English 104 is designed to incorporate as few as possible of these stumbling blocks in its own format so that it can effectively teach the student to deal with them in other courses. Thus our classes are small (18 maximum) and personal. Each student has an individual appointment with his instructor once a week. The weekly conference gives the instructor an opportunity to talk with the student about his progress or about problems he may be having with a particular aspect of the course. It also makes possible individual instruction. For example, student and instructor can compare notes on a particular lecture and together listen to a tape the instructor has made of that lecture in order to understand why their notes may be different.

In addition to keeping class size small and offering individual instruction, we try to give assignments in small segments since large reading assignments have been identified as a stumbling block. Explanatory reading necessary for any skill is given in assignments of less than ten pages.[8] (Assignments to practice underlining in textbooks are necessarily given in larger segments, often coinciding with an assignment in the lecture course.) The small segment technique is also used in teaching the research paper. Students are given twelve consecutive assignments which together produce a satisfactory term paper.

In order to avoid the third stumbling block (material presented only in lecture form), English 104 involves few straight "lectures." Most material is presented on the basis of teacher explanation, student question, practice, further explanation and questions, and a test of the skill.

Examinations which require a student to discuss a skill rather than demonstrate it are not required in English 104; thus essay tests are given only after the students have had an opportunity to practice

writing short essays and citing factual information from memory. Essay tests are used in English 104 solely to determine whether the student has mastered the skill of writing essay examinations. We do this because we are trying to structure the class so that a student who is weak in one area is able to progress in other areas while working on his special problem. Students may take repeated skill tests until they finally reach a satisfactory performance level. Thus it is not unusual for practice in one area to overlap assignments in another area.

Emphasis on specific skills which the student, from his experience in the "paired" course can perceive as necessary for success in college, is one of the strong points of the course. It is usual for students to find their grades in the "paired" course rising over the semester. This helps convince them that the English exercises are useful.

We have had three main problems with English 104. One has been the number of instructor hours per week required for the course. With five class hours per section, plus three hours attending the "paired" course, individual appointments with each student, and many small assignments to be marked; the teaching load is heavy. We have tried to reduce the time required by programming one aspect of the course--the note taking portion. We have developed and taped what we think is a workable program that takes students from six to fifteen hours to complete.

In an effort to further save time, we have successfully tried combining regular sections for certain presentations, which results in the student occasionally finding himself in a rather large English class.

Even with these innovations, we find that three, eighteen-student English 104 sections is a full load. This has led to another problem--

occasional criticism from the efficiency experts on our campus; however "teaching" large groups of Native students who either flunk out or become depressed and leave is, to our minds, far more inefficient.

A third problem has been determining appropriate credit for English 104. Some of the course material (e.g. the reading skills) can be considered remedial in that it should have been (but wasn't) taught to students in high school; other skills (e.g. the library research paper) are those customarily taught during the freshman year of college. Low expectations of rural high schools resulted in many poorly prepared students arriving at college with good high school grades. Offering English 104 and other special English courses without credit would have meant that nearly all students from these schools would have had to take one or more non-credit courses before entering regular freshman English. This would have been an especially severe blow to the motivation of a student with good high school grades. These and other considerations went into the final determination of credit. English 104 students now receive three credits for the five-hour class.

Despite these and other minor problems we feel English 104 is one of the strong points of our curriculum. Pairing English 104 with a lecture course keeps both student and instructor aware of skills the student needs and his progress in learning these skills. Although there is little time in the course for work with finer points of writing or of reading non-text materials, English 104 helps assure that students will be at the University another semester to learn more English.

In the past English teachers at the University of Alaska sometimes found themselves in the position of teaching important points of grammar, writing, and reading to students who then left school because of their failures in lecture courses. At times English teachers, as well as

students, had the frustrating sensation of getting nowhere. Our courses are designed to reduce some of that frustration. With English 104, we hope that we are going somewhere.